What Were They Like?

SUMMARY

1) Did the Vietnamese people use stone lanterns?
2) Did they have formal rituals to express their deep respect for the blossoming of flowers?
3) Was their laughter generally quiet?
4) Did they use bone, animal tusks, jade, and silver to make jewelry and decorative objects?
5) Did they have a long narrative poem about a legendary or historical hero?
6) Could they tell the difference between talking and singing?

1) Sir, their carefree hearts became heavy like stone. No one remembers if they had stone lanterns to light the lovely paths through their gardens.
2) Maybe they used to come together to celebrate spring, but once their children were killed there was no more growth, no new beginnings to celebrate.
3) Sir, laughter is painful to those who are suffering.
4) In another world, maybe they did. But making beautiful objects is something happy people do, and all of their bones were burnt.
5) No one remembers if they had such a poem. You have to keep in mind that most of these people were poor farmers; they lived their lives in the rice and bamboo fields. When calm clouds could be seen reflected in the water of the rice fields, and the water buffalo walked confidently along the flat steps in the sloping hills, maybe fathers recited old stories to their sons. But when bombs exploded in the fields, they only had time to scream.
6) There is still an echo of the song-like way they spoke. Someone once said their singing was like moths flying in moonlight. But who knows? They can't be heard anymore.

THEMES

THE UNKNOWABLE LOSSES OF GENOCIDE

Levertov's poem imagines a future in which the Vietnamese people and their culture have been essentially wiped out by the Vietnam War. In this future, two people are having a conversation: one asks questions about what the people of Vietnam were like, yet the other is unable to answer with anything more than supposition. This second voice draws a picture of what *might* have been lost in the conflict, while admitting there is no way to be sure. By juxtaposing historical inquiry with responses that resist closure and certainty, "What Were They Like" emphasizes just how unknowable the losses of wartime devastation and cultural destruction really are.

The poem opens with a series of questions implying that "the people of Viet Nam" no longer exist. It isn't until the second stanza that the reader receives context as to why this is the case: they were wiped out by war, and more specifically, bombs.

This draws attention to the *scale* of the killing. The fact that the poem is titled "What Were They Like" evidences that the poem is tackling not just war, but *genocide*—the deliberate killing of an entire people. The evidence of genocide is present in the poem's description of *who* was killed—not only soldiers, but also "peasants" and "their children." The image of the "peaceful paddies" being "smashed" by bombs illustrates that genocide has no limits: it wipes out entire peoples, entire ways of life.

The questions that open the poem are posed by a different speaker than the one who describes the war. This first speaker can be assumed to be a historian or anthropologist, someone who wants to be able to characterize what the Vietnamese people were like, and what was lost with them—their ways of life, their customs and art. His questions are specific: did the people of Viet Nam have an epic poem or use bone, ivory, jade, or silver to make decorative objects?

While the speaker of the first stanza of the poem is looking for answers to specific questions—that is, for knowledge—the speaker of the second stanza resists this kind of certainty. They respond to the questions in ways that refuse closure; they offer possibilities while also acknowledging the fact that it is impossible for anyone to know for sure what was lost in the genocide of the Vietnamese people.

This second speaker begins or ends answers with "perhaps" or "it is not remembered." This speaker is trying to illustrate what life *could* have been like for the Vietnamese people while also admitting to the incompleteness of any knowledge they could ever have regarding a people who were entirely wiped out.

In this way, the poem argues that history can never approximate what is lost in the event of such a devastating war; these losses are incomprehensible. The only people who could say for sure no longer exist. Any "knowledge" is suspect because it is at best incomplete, at worst mere supposition. All such knowledge only underlines how much remains unknown—and the unknowable nature of what was lost.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31

THE HUMAN COST OF WAR

The poem draws attention to the suffering of civilians—ordinary, everyday people whose lives were "in rice and bamboo"—as a reminder that the people often most affected by war are not the ones who actually wage it. The war's victims, the poem argues, were largely innocent people who had nothing to do with the fighting, and were fundamentally just like anyone else: human beings trying to go about their lives. In highlighting the fundamental humanity of the Vietnamese people, the poem asks the reader to acknowledge the unjust inhumanity of war.

While there is a somewhat patronizing quality to the questions posed by the first speaker, the speaker of the second part of the poem portrays the "peasants" affected by the war in ways that emphasize their humanity. The first speaker wants to characterize the Vietnamese people according to whether they had "an epic poem"—perhaps something like *The Odyssey*—or whether they "could distinguish between speech and singing." These questions seem to imply a Western standard against which the Vietnamese people, who in the world of the poem have been wiped out by war, are being measured. The first speaker implies a fundamental distance between Westerners and the Vietnamese people.

Rather than responding "yes" or "no" and thereby validating the implications of the first speaker's questions, the second speaker answers in a way that draws attention not to the *differences* between the people killed in the Vietnam War and the people wondering about them later, but to their *similarities*—that is, to their essential humanity.

The speaker of the second stanza paints a picture of a father and son in the rice fields, the father telling the son "old tales." This image suggests that it doesn't really matter whether the people of Vietnam had "an epic poem"—in one form or another, they shared a fundamental human desire to pass stories from generation to generation. Whatever it looked like, it mattered. However they expressed their humanity, their humanity isn't up for debate.

Likewise, rather than assenting to the first speaker's question about whether the Vietnamese people could "distinguish between speech and singing," the second speaker instead draws attention to the ephemeral quality of their expression, saying, "It was reported their singing resembled / the flight of moths in moonlight." This image assigns beauty and value to their expression, again drawing attention to what really matters: not that their modes of expression are different from those wondering about them later, but that this expression, whatever it looked like, existed at all.

By drawing attention to the people at the center of the first speaker's questions, the second speaker reminds the reader of the true devastation of war: not just the loss of knowledge around an extinct culture, but the loss of the actual human beings to which that culture belonged. By juxtaposing beautiful yet ordinary life with the devastation of bombs and the silence that follows, the poem reminds the reader of what is truly lost in war.

Furthermore, by juxtaposing two different ways of talking about what was lost, the poem emphasizes that it matters that people see and think of other human beings as fundamentally similar to themselves. It is in choosing not to see someone else's humanity that humanity is lost: not just in terms of the people who are killed but also in terms of the people doing the killing.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

1) Did the ...
... opening of buds?

"What Were They Like" begins with a series of questions about "the people of Viet Nam." The nature of the questions, along with their formality, imply that the poem's first speaker is likely a historian or an anthropologist, someone who is trying to understand a culture that no longer exists. This, combined with the title, provides some context for the poem. In the world of the poem, the Vietnamese people and their culture have been wiped out, and now someone, most likely a historian, is trying to understand what they were like.

In the first question, the enjambment after "Did the people of Viet Nam" draws attention to what's missing in the world of the poem: the Vietnamese people themselves. Note that the movement of the question across the line break is from general ("Did the people of Viet Nam") to specific ("use lanterns of stone?"). There is a sense of the speaker trying to understand an entire people based on a single detail. It is implied that knowing whether the Vietnamese people used stone lanterns will tell this person something important about their way of life.

The syntax (the arrangement of words) in the second line places an emphasis on the word "stone" because it falls at the end of the line (a more casual syntax might have been "use stone lanterns," in which case the emphasis would have fallen on the word "lantern"). By emphasizing the word "stone," Levertov allows for certain connotations to enter the poem: one might think of the "Stone Age" and the notion of "primitive" peoples and tools.

The second question is structured similarly; it again moves from general to specific across the line break—"Did they hold ceremonies" being general, "to reverence the opening of buds" being specific. "Buds" refers to the early form of flowers.

Basically, the speaker is asking if the Vietnamese people had some sort of cultural or religious ceremonies to mark the start of spring.

The questions are seeking information, but there is also a sense of othering already happening in these opening lines. The question of "what were they like" followed by these particular questions—did they use stone lanterns, did they celebrate "the opening of buds"—implies another question, one that is more telling: how were they *different* from the people represented by the speaker?

LINES 5-7

3) Were they inclined ...
... silver, for ornament?

In lines 5-7, the speaker continues the line of questioning that opened the poem, now asking if the Vietnamese people "were inclined to quiet laughter." The speaker is trying to understand or characterize a culture with whatever information might be available, going on to ask if "they use[d] bone and ivory, / jade and silver, for ornament?" In other words, the speaker wants to know if they made decorative items or jewelry.

While the speaker's questions appear neutral on the surface, the poem begins to do some work sonically here. Note the consonance of /k/ and /l/ sounds and assonance of long /i/ sounds in "inclined to quiet laughter"—making the phrase itself more noticeable in the poem despite the fact that those laughing voices are gone.

In the next lines, the repetition of /n/, /r/, and /v/ sounds, plus the soft /j/ and /l/ sounds, creates a brief moment of euphony, or sonic pleasure, when read aloud:

> Did they use bone and ivory,
> jade and silver, for ornament?

This pleasure is somewhat disturbing in relation to the speaker's subject: the absence of an entire people. It creates tension; there is a disconnect between *what* the speaker is talking about and *how* he is talking about it. (Particularly because, for the reader, "the people of Viet Nam" *aren't* extinct.)

It should feel strange for the reader to imagine that the Vietnamese people have been wiped out and in their place is this person asking questions about their culture who seems almost to be enjoying them, whose interest in understanding or characterizing their culture seems to outweigh any sense of loss or responsibility. Instead, the speaker is focused on things like how loudly they laughed or what kind of jewelry they wore.

LINES 8-9

5) Had they an ...
... speech and singing?

The nature of the speaker's questions becomes most apparent in lines 8-9 when the speaker asks if the people of Vietnam had "an epic poem." Many cultures from all over the world have oral or written narratives chronicling the deeds of heroic figures, historical or mythical—think of works like *The Odyssey*. Yet within the context of this poem, the question of whether the Vietnamese people had an "epic poem" feels like a way of measuring their accomplishments against a Western standard of what it means to be a civilized or advanced society.

This implication is echoed in the following line, when the speaker questions whether the Vietnamese saw a difference between speaking and singing. Each of these questions on their own appear quite neutral, but the cumulative effect of them is, again, othering. There is a sense that the speaker is trying to identify ways in which Vietnamese culture was *different* from the culture he represents.

Regardless of how one interprets the tone of these questions, one thing is certain: the speaker is searching for information, for what can possibly be known about this culture that no longer exists. The use of anaphora (the repetition of "Did they" at the beginning of successive sentences throughout the first stanza) emphasizes the speaker's quest for understanding. What is perhaps most interesting about the speaker's questions is that they are all yes-no questions; that is, they imply that they should either be answered with a yes or a no. There is a narrowness to this kind of inquiry—an expectation that they will be met with definitive answers, with certainty.

LINE 10

1) Sir, their light ... turned to stone.

After the stanza break, the poem shifts to a second speaker, one who addresses the first speaker as "Sir"—perhaps implying that the first speaker occupies some position of power or respect. This address is followed by a response to the first question posed in the opening stanza, thus establishing a question and answer format to the stanzas.

Question: "Did the people of Viet Nam / use lanterns of stone?" Answer: "their light hearts turned to stone." Rather than agreeing to the terms of the first speaker's question (that it be answered with a yes or a no), the second speaker provides an answer that expresses an emotional truth that goes beyond the premise of the question.

This second speaker is using figurative language to express that something awful has happened: the once cheery, carefree hearts of the Vietnamese people became heavy and still, like stone. The sibilance and consonance here lend the line a hushed, slightly bitter tone ("light hearts turned to stone"). Even though line 10 is a statement, it leaves more space for uncertainty than does the question that predicates it. It seems to imply that the first speaker is asking the wrong question, that it doesn't really *matter* whether the Vietnamese people used lanterns of stone: such a question distracts from what is really important, which is the heaviness the second speaker

describes.

LINES 11-12

It is not ...
... lanterns illumined pleasant ways.

The second speaker then continues on to offer a more direct answer to the question of whether the Vietnamese people used lanterns made of stone, saying "It is not remembered." Again, though answering with a statement, this speaker is expressing uncertainty; or rather, certainty that any knowledge about Vietnamese culture would have been lost with the Vietnamese people.

This speaker also inverts the syntax of the original question, changing "lanterns of stone" to "stone lanterns." This is a subtle way of changing the emphasis of the image. While the first speaker emphasized what the lanterns were made out of, the second speaker emphasizes the purpose of the lanterns: to illumine the garden paths. This speaker's priorities have less to do with the surface of Vietnamese culture and more to do with the inhumanity of it having been lost.

Lines 11-12 mirror some of the euphony employed in the first stanza. The buzzing, humming consonance of /n/, /z/, /r/, /m/, /t/, and /l/ sounds mimics the pleasure this speaker imagines the Vietnamese people feeling as they walked through their gardens:

> It is not remembered whether in gardens
> stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.

Unlike the speaker of the first stanza, however, this speaker acknowledges and emphasizes that this pleasant picture, for all intents and purposes, is imaginary: without the Vietnamese people there to speak for themselves, they can only project assumptions and possibilities. Any truth regarding the Vietnamese people belonged to the Vietnamese people.

LINES 13-15

2) Perhaps they ...
... no more buds.

Lines 13-15 ("Perhaps they gathered [...] no more buds.") are the second speaker's response to the second question posed in the first stanza ("Did they hold ceremonies / to reverence the opening of buds".) The speaker of this stanza continues in much the same tone as before, beginning their answer with "perhaps" to indicate the unknowable nature of what was lost.

These lines at first continue with the euphony present in prior lines too, but the sonic pleasure abruptly gives way to the stark matter-of-factness of the children's deaths, after which "there were no more buds." The pleasure of the gardens and celebration of blossoms is juxtaposed (set side by side in order to create a sense of contrast) with the stark horror of the children being killed, of there being "no more buds."

"Buds" takes on symbolic resonance as it becomes clear that the death of the children is the death of a future for the Vietnamese people. To say "there were no more buds" is to say that there would be no more springs, no more growth, no more beginnings.

For the reader, this "answer" again holds more questions than it does certainty. Why were the children killed? Who killed them? By using the word "killed" rather than "died," the speaker implies a killer—that the children did not die of natural causes. The reader begins to wonder who is responsible for these deaths, a question not posed by the first speaker.

LINES 16-18

3) Sir, laughter ...
... bones were charred.

The speaker of the first stanza asked if the people of Vietnam were "inclined to quiet laughter." The speaker of the second stanza responds in line 16, saying, "Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth." In other words, how can they speak about the laughter of a people who have lost everything?

"A dream ago, perhaps" may refer to both the laughter and the ornamentation—neither feels as though it could have ever been real, and instead is something like a "dream." The second speaker is essentially saying, how can one remember joy amidst such terrible sorrow and suffering?

The speaker then responds directly to the question of whether "they use[d] bone and ivory [...] for ornament" by saying that "Ornament is for joy"—that people attend to beauty when they are happy, when their needs are met, when they have hope. The speaker then juxtaposes this statement with another one of simple horror: "All the bones were charred." The speaker doesn't need to make a speech about the impossibility of a people finding or making beauty amidst the charred bones of their children; the juxtaposition does this work. The reader can see how pointless it is to talk about making pretty decoration from "bone and ivory, jade and silver" in the face of such crippling despair. Beauty seems unimportant in comparison to such a loss.

The presence of consonance in these lines, this time due to the repetition of /t/, /r/, and /m/ sounds, has a different effect than the euphony heard in earlier lines. There is a muted and bitter quality to the sounds in these lines, echoed by the shortness of the sentences. Rather than stretching across two or more lines, these sentences are clipped, direct. This speaker is clearly feeling the horror of what they're describing. The alliteration of loud /b/ sounds adds to this effect, echoing loudly in "bitter," "burned," and "bones."

LINES 19-21

5) It is ...
... rice and bamboo.

The speaker next answers the question from the first stanza of: "Had they an epic poem?" The answer is: "It is not remembered." In other words, no one knows; there is no one left to remember such a poem if it existed.

Importantly, lines 19-21 begin with the use of anadiplosis:

> It is not remembered. Remember,

This particular instance of anadiplosis allows the speaker to pivot from answering the first speaker's question (about the epic poem) to reminding the first speaker (and the reader by extension) that the people who lost their children were, for the most part, poor farmers. In other words, even if the Vietnamese people in general used bone and ivory and jade and silver to make beautiful objects, it is unlikely that these specific people who lost everything had access to such luxuries.

The first speaker is asking questions in an attempt to characterize a culture, but culture is made up of many kinds of people with many different experiences. The second speaker wants the first to understand that the people in question weren't people of means; their lives were simple; they were primarily concerned with their crops.

This distinction is important as it begins to reveal one of the major themes of the poem: in times of war, who is most likely to suffer?

LINES 22-24

When peaceful clouds ...
... sons old tales.

The second speaker responds to the first speaker's question of whether the Vietnamese people had "an epic poem" by offering an image of what these peasants' lives might have looked like before the war: the scene they describe is one of calm, beauty, and certainty. The clouds are "peaceful" and even the water buffalo walk "surely," unafraid. The image of fathers telling their sons old tales is one any person from any culture could relate to. It doesn't really matter whether they had an epic poem, the speaker seems to say: the impulse to pass stories from generation to generation is a human one. In some form or other, it existed.

These lines move back into the speaker's imagination; they are again projecting possibilities of what life could have been like for the Vietnamese people before they were wiped out by the war. The sentence stretches across three long lines, and consonance and alliteration give the passage a pleasant feel. Note the repetition of /p/ sounds in "peaceful," "paddies," and "stepped," and the repetition of /t/ sounds in "reflected," "water," "stepped," "terraces," "told," and "tales." By giving the reader a chance to imagine this peaceful scene, the speaker encourages an identification with these people: whatever they were like, they were not so fundamentally different from anyone else. They enjoyed beautiful weather. They told stories to pass the time. It is a familiar scene, one that puts the reader at ease.

LINES 25-28

When bombs smashed ...
... like a song.

The peaceful image of the father and son in the rice fields is juxtaposed with the reality of war: the premise of the poem becomes finally fully clear in lines 25-28, as the speaker describes the bombs destroying the fields and the people who worked them. Even the speaker's description of the violence has a muted quality to it, however; the heavy consonance of /m/ sounds in the words "bombs," "smashed," "mirrors," "time," and "scream" renders the scene quiet and muffled, as if even the final terror of these people is beyond the reach of memory, as those who experienced it are no longer there to speak of it.

Line 27 ("There is an echo yet") is syntactically connected to line 28 ("of their speech which was like a song."). But because of the line breaks around it isolate it, it seems to refer to the "scream" in line 26 as well, implying that such violence reverberates through time, haunting those who survive.

In responding to the first speaker's final question regarding whether the people of Vietnam could "distinguish between speech and singing," the second speaker uses a simile to compare these two forms of expression, saying their speech "was like a song." This comparison implies that though speech and singing may appear different on the surface, they are fundamentally more similar than they are different. This speaker is more interested in the overlap between speech and song than the difference, perhaps indicating that they also believe the fundamental similarities between different peoples are more meaningful than the surface differences. In any case, the Vietnamese people's speech—their expression—was beautiful. It mattered.

LINES 29-31

It was reported ...
... is silent now.

In the concluding lines of the poem, the second speaker focuses on the beauty of the Vietnamese people's singing, which was said to have resembled "the flight of moths in moonlight." This image conveys not only beauty but a quietness, a reverence, and a sense of transience. The speaker is expressing respect and awe for the fact of the Vietnamese people having existed at all, a respect for life, which is already delicate and brief by nature. By drawing attention to the beauty of their singing, their expression, the speaker emphasizes the value of human life.

The gentle sounds of these lines add to the reverent tone. Note the alliteration and consonance of /m/, /r/, and /l/ sounds:

> It was reported their singing resembled

the flight of moths in moonlight.

Finally, the speaker juxtaposes the beauty of their singing with the silence that has replaced them. This juxtaposition expresses the loss of that beauty, the loss of the people responsible for that beauty, a loss which can never be fully understood or articulated.

The unknowable extent of that loss is present in the speaker's rhetorical question, "Who can say?" Unlike the questions posed by the first speaker, this question is not meant to elicit an answer, but is instead asked to illustrate a point—the point in this case being the absence of the people who actually could have said whether this report of their singing was true. The rhetorical question points to the fact that there simply are no answers to be found. The loss is too great.

SYMBOLS

BUDS

Buds (the early stages of a flower) in this poem symbolize hope, new growth, and promise. The *absence* of buds, in turn, reflects the futures stolen from the Vietnamese people.

Early in the poem, the first speaker asks if "the people of Viet Nam" held ceremonies to show their respect and awe for "the opening of buds." The speaker is asking about a ceremony that likely represents a celebration of springtime, of the cycle of renewal inherent in the changing seasons. Yet later in the poem, the second speaker claims that after the Vietnamese children were killed, "there were no more buds." In other words, for the Vietnamese people who survived the bombings, there was no longer any point in celebrating the renewal of life. There were no more new beginnings; without their children, they had no hope.

This speaks to the magnitude and desolation of war and of genocide, as bombs do not discriminate between soldiers and civilians. By appealing to a natural sense of order—the idea of flowers growing and replenishing themselves—the poem makes plain the argument that cruelty of such magnitude is unnatural, and that the consequences are beyond understanding.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Did they hold ceremonies / to reverence the opening of buds?"
- **Lines 13-15:** "Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom, / but after their children were killed / there were no more buds."

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Levertov uses anaphora throughout the first stanza of the poem as the speaker repeatedly asks questions about "the people of Viet Nam" using some variation of the phrase "Did they."

"Did" is a question word that implies a yes or no answer. While the title ("What Were They Like") is a broad question that could be answered in any number of ways, the speaker's questions are narrow, almost implying the answer for which he is looking.

The repeated use of the past tense also helps to immediately establish the premise of the poem: that the people being referred to by the speaker no longer exist. In addition to anaphora, Levertov uses parallelism to vary the language (using "Were" and "Had" in lines 5 and 8, but keeping the grammatical structure of a question word followed by "they"). The somewhat varied language feels more natural than if she were to have used the same phrase every time, while still maintaining the structure of a narrow, yes/no question.

The anaphora also helps make it very obvious that the first stanza is delivered by a different speaker than the second stanza. Even though it is the first speaker who is asking questions and the second speaker who is answering them, the specificity and narrowness of the questions make them feel more like answers than the second speaker's answers, which feel more open to uncertainty, and therefore more like questions. The anaphora seems to hint at a rigidity, a specific way of thinking about things that the second speaker goes on to undermine or reject.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Did the people"
- **Line 3:** " Did they"
- **Line 5:** "Were they"
- **Line 6:** "Did they"
- **Line 8:** "Had they"
- **Line 9:** "Did they"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout the poem. For example, in lines 15-18, the alliteration seen in the repetition of /b/ words echoes the devastation the speaker is describing:

there were no more buds.
3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.
[...]
All the bones were charred.

The /b/ sounds help create a sense of contrast compared to the

euphony that came earlier in the stanza, a kind of sonic echo of what the speaker is saying—that yes, there may have been beauty once, but now it is gone.

Later, in lines 22-24 (When peaceful [...] old tales."), alliteration assists the images in creating a feeling of peacefulness and simple beauty. There is a sense of order and things being as they are meant to be, aided by the shared, sharp /p/ of "peaceful" and "paddies" or the /t/ of "told" and "tales." This order and beauty is shattered by the arrival of bombs. Again Levertov is trying to show the devastation of the war, how it brought an end to everything that had come before.

Finally, in lines 28-31 ("of their speech [...] silent now."), alliteration again helps create a sense of the beauty which was lost along with the Vietnamese people. There is a subtle music to the pairing of alliterative words—"speech" and "singing," "reported" and "resembled," "moths" and moonlight." The lines unfold harmoniously. In the last line, the alliteration present in "say" and "silent" is also sibilance; the /s/ sounds emphasize the silence which has replaced the voices of the people of Vietnam.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "speech," "singing"
- **Line 10:** "Sir," "turned to stone"
- **Line 13:** "blossom"
- **Line 14:** "but"
- **Line 15:** "buds"
- **Line 16:** "bitter," "burned"
- **Line 18:** "bones"
- **Line 22:** "peaceful," "paddies"
- **Line 24:** "told," "tales"
- **Line 28:** "speech," "song"
- **Line 29:** "reported," "singing," "resembled"
- **Line 30:** "moths," "moonlight"
- **Line 31:** "say," "silent"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout the poem. The feeling of any given passage depends largely on the nature of the consonance (i.e., which sounds are being repeated). In the first stanza, for example, note the sharp, hard /k/ sounds and /l/ sounds of "inclined to quiet laughter." Combined with assonance of the long /i/ sound, the phrase itself is rather jarring and loud—the opposite of what it seeks to portray, subtly suggesting the inappropriate nature of the question.

In other moments, however, the repetition of sounds helps contribute to a subtle sense of euphony, as if the speaker is taking some degree of pleasure in his questions, the pleasure of a historian attempting to piece together a puzzle, a picture of how things used to be. Take lines 6-7, where the /z/, /v/, /n/, /r/, and /j/ sounds evoke a gentle hum or buzz:

> [...] bone and ivory,
> jade and silver, for ornament?

Later, the consonance of /t/ and /n/ sounds in line 10, along with the overlapping presence of sibilance, indicates a subtle shift in tone. There is a reverence, a hushed quality, to the second speaker's response—but also a hint of bitterness with that sharp /t/, again suggesting that the first speaker has been asking the wrong questions:

> Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.

Throughout the rest of the poem, consonance tends to lend itself either to the presence of euphony in passages describing what the Vietnamese way of life might have been like, such as in lines 11-13 ("It is not [...] in blossom.") and lines 22-24 ("When peaceful [...] old tales."). Take the /l/ and /s/ consonance of line 23:

> and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,

Yet in other moments, consonance interrupts and contrasts with the euphony. For instance, after the peaceful image of clouds floating above rice fields and farmers telling their sons old stories, lines 25-26 utilize /m/ sounds in a way that evokes the muteness which follows:

> When bombs smashed those mirrors
> there was time only to scream.

The scream seems already to be cut off; all that's left is "an echo." It's as if not only did the bombs rob these ordinary people of their lives, their way of life, but also of their voices—their story.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "ceremonies"
- **Line 4:** "reverence"
- **Line 5:** "inclined to quiet laughter"
- **Lines 6-7:** "bone and ivory, / jade and silver, for ornament"
- **Line 8:** "epic poem"
- **Line 9:** "Did," "distinguish," "speech," "singing"
- **Line 10:** "Sir," "light hearts turned to stone"
- **Lines 11-12:** "remembered whether in gardens / stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways"
- **Line 13:** "blossom"
- **Line 14:** "but"
- **Line 15:** "buds"
- **Line 16:** "laughter," "bitter," "burned"
- **Line 18:** "bones," "were charred"
- **Line 21:** "rice," "bamboo"

- **Line 22:** “peaceful clouds,” “reflected,” “paddies”
- **Line 23:** “buffalo stepped surely along terraces”
- **Line 24:** “told,” “old tales”
- **Line 25:** “bombs smashed,” “mirrors”
- **Line 26:** “time only to scream”
- **Line 28:** “speech which was,” “song”
- **Line 29:** “reported their singing resembled”
- **Line 30:** “flight,” “moths in moonlight”
- **Line 31:** “can say,” “silent now”

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is subtly present throughout the poem, infusing it with a quietness and reverence. While there is a clear difference between the two speakers and their corresponding stanzas, the poem as a whole speaks to the gravity of the loss of an entire people and their culture. The speakers address this in very different ways (and the poem seems to imply a kind of skeptical attitude towards the first speaker's quest for knowledge in light of the circumstances), but, regardless, the overall effect is two people trying to reckon with something unimaginable. The poem's use of sibilance—its many quiet, whispered sounds—is thus important in maintaining its serious and somber tone. Take lines 2-4, where the gentle /s/ of "stone," "ceremonies," and, indeed, "reverence" adds a soft hush to the lines.

In the second stanza, the speaker also turns to sibilance when describing scenes from Vietnamese life. Take line 13:

> Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,

And line 23:

> and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,

In both lines, the mixture of sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds mixes with other gentle sounds—/l/, /m/, /z/, /th/—adds to the pleasantness of the imagery at hand.

Finally, as the /s/ sounds again become prevalent toward the end of the poem, so too does the reader's sense of what's missing. Silence—or the feeling of silence created by the presence of sibilance in words like "speech, "song," "singing," "say," and, of course, the word "silent" itself—serves a very emotional function in this poem as the reader becomes aware that no answers can ever approximate what was lost in the war. Thematically, silence speaks to the unknowable nature of loss on such a horrendous scale: war and genocide leave gaps in the world that knowledge simply cannot fill.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “stone”
- **Line 3:** “ceremonies”
- **Line 4:** “reverence”
- **Line 9:** “distinguish,” “speech,” “singing”
- **Line 10:** “Sir,” “hearts,” “stone”
- **Line 13:** “Perhaps,” “once,” “blossom”
- **Line 23:** “stepped surely,” “terraces”
- **Line 28:** “speech,” “song”
- **Line 29:** “singing”
- **Line 31:** “say,” “silent”

ANADIPLOSIS

There is just one instance of anadiplosis in the poem, in line 19:

> It is not remembered. Remember,

The anadiplosis here serves a couple of functions. The first is that it allows the speaker to pivot. The second speaker answers the first speaker's question (Question: "Had they an epic poem?" Answer: "It is not remembered."), and then immediately redirects to something the second speaker finds more relevant, more important than whether the Vietnamese people had an epic poem: the revelation that most of the people killed in the bombings were peasants and farmers, that their ways of life were known only to themselves.

The second function of anadiplosis here is that it allows for the repetition of a concept that is central to the poem's aim: memory, or lack thereof. Due to the placement of line breaks, "not remembered" and "Remember" are pushed up against each other, contradicting one another. In a way, the poem seems to imply with this contradiction that remembering is both impossible and necessary, that any truth about the Vietnamese people was lost along with the Vietnamese people, but that those who are left to reckon with this loss have a responsibility to remember what was lost. Particularly because in the world of the poem, the people who are left to reckon with the loss are the people who are responsible for the loss—which is Levertov's way of protesting U.S. involvement in the war.

Where Anadiplosis appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** “5) It is not remembered. Remember,”

EUPHONY

This poem operates largely through the use of juxtaposition, moving back and forth between contrasting scenes of the speaker imagining the beauty of the Vietnamese people and then returning to the reality at hand: the fact of their having been wiped out by the war. Euphony plays a significant role in the poem, as it contributes to the sense of beauty and harmony in the imagined scenes, which feel nearly dreamlike; as the speaker says, if they happened, they happened "a dream ago,"

or in other words, in some other reality. These scenes aren't real but imagined.

So, for example, in lines 22-24 ("When peaceful [...] old tales."), the peacefulness of the image is partly achieved through the use of euphony. When read aloud, these lines are pleasant and melodic, easily tripping off the tongue with their flurry of harmonious /l/, /s/, /f/, /t/, /d/, and /z/ sounds:

> When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
> and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
> maybe fathers told their sons old tales.

By contrast, the following lines replace euphony with a consonance of /m/ sounds, a close-mouthed sound that replicates the muteness that followed the war, the shocked, traumatized silence of those who saw the "charred" remains of their loved ones.

In lines 29-30, euphony again contributes to an almost mythological rendering of the Vietnamese people as /z/, /r/, /s/, /th/, /m/, and /l/ sounds create a gentle hum:

> It was reported their singing resembled
> the flight of moths in moonlight.

The poem is drawing attention to the way that cultures which no longer exist have no control over their own narrative. They become subject to "report," to other people's rendering of them. There may be a kind of beauty in these renderings, but, the poem asks, how can there be truth, when any truth was lost in the war?

Where Euphony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Did they use bone and ivory, / jade and silver, for ornament?"
- **Lines 11-12:** "It is not remembered whether in gardens / stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways."
- **Lines 22-24:** "When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies / and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces, / maybe fathers told their sons old tales."
- **Lines 29-30:** "It was reported their singing resembled / the flight of moths in moonlight."

CAESURA

Caesura is used sparingly in this poem. This lends a kind of matter-of-factness to the lines; there isn't much wandering or digressing. The first instance of caesura, in line 7 ("jade and silver, for ornament?") is a result of the speaker breaking up a list of materials into two groups rather than listing them all together. It creates a somewhat more natural feel than if the speaker had listed them all out at once. It contributes to the euphony of the line, providing a sense of rhythm.

In the second stanza, caesura appears in lines 10 ("Sir, their [...] to stone.") and 16 ("Sir, laughter [...] burned mouth."), when the second speaker explicitly addresses the first. The speaker is trying to impart to the first a somberness, a recognition of what it really is they're attempting to describe. One can almost imagine the second speaker feeling a little taken aback with the first speaker's line of questioning; the second speaker tries to remind the first of the impossibility of answering his questions with any degree of certainty.

Caesura appears in line 17 ("A dream [...] for joy."), as the speaker pauses between sentences with a full stop. This helps lend weight and finality to the speaker's declaration that it was only "[a] dream ago, perhaps" that the Vietnamese people used "bone and ivory, / jade and silver, for ornament." The finality of the full stop here does two things:

1. It underscores that any such "ornament" or cause for decoration only existed in a time that has since passed;
2. And it emphasizes the word "perhaps," drawing attention to the speaker's doubt. The word "perhaps" suggests the speaker's uncertainty about what the Vietnamese people were like, and the full stop that follows it suggests that uncertainty will never be resolved.

In lines 19-20 ("It is [...] their life"), caesura places emphasis on the words on either side of it: "remembered" and "remember," "peasants" and "their life." It breaks up the mostly predictable absence of caesura, lending emphasis again to what is not known and also to what little *is* known: that the people in question were not soldiers, or politicians, or kings—they were ordinary, they led ordinary lives.

Finally, in the poem's last line, caesura allows for a pregnant pause following the speaker's rhetorical question:

> Who can say? It is silent now.

Like the questions that began the poem, this one implies its answer—though the answer in this case is paradoxically a *lack* of answers. The speaker can offer only the silence of those who could have answered yet no longer can.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "silver, for"
- **Line 10:** "Sir, their"
- **Line 16:** "Sir, laughter"
- **Line 17:** "ago, perhaps. Ornament"
- **Line 19:** "remembered. Remember"
- **Line 20:** "peasants; their"
- **Line 31:** "say? It"

SIMILE

In the last few lines of the poem, the second speaker uses simile to undermine and transform the first speaker's question as to whether the people of Vietnam "distinguish[ed] between speech and singing." This initial question has an undertone of condescension to it; it seems as though the person asking this question has some doubts about the perceptive abilities of the people he's trying to learn more about.

The second speaker responds not by answering the question, but instead by saying:

> There is an echo yet
> of their speech which was like a song.

By comparing their speech to a song, the speaker does two things.

1. The speaker blurs the distinction between speech and singing, rendering it irrelevant.
2. The speaker assigns value to the expression of the Vietnamese people. By saying their speech "was like a song," the second speaker implies that what they had to say—to each other, to themselves, of themselves—was beautiful. It mattered.

The first speaker's question wants to articulate how the Vietnamese people were *different* from the people he himself represents (i.e., a Western culture). The second speaker's answer focuses on the *humanity* of the Vietnamese people, on the ways in which expression is fleeting and magical as "the flight of moths in moonlight."

This second simile draws a parallel between their forms of expression and a very visceral, beautiful image of nature. It seems to say that their lives were never meant to be scrutinized by outsiders, just as moths flying in moonlight are unlikely to be noticed. Their lives were meaningful to themselves and to each other, and nothing known or unknown about them can diminish that. When the poem ends in silence, the reader feels the loss of that beauty—the loss of these people who were both different from and the same as anyone else.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-30:** "There is an echo yet / of their speech which was like a song. / It was reported their singing resembled / the flight of moths in moonlight."

METAPHOR

Metaphor is used sparingly in this poem. The metaphors used are relatively straight-forward, contributing to the candid feel of the poem. The first of these appears in line 10, when the second speaker says to the first that the hearts of the Vietnamese people "turned to stone." The speaker is not saying that their hearts *literally* turned into rocks. Instead, they're illustrating the heaviness of having lived through war and genocide, the unimaginable difficulty of having seen their loved ones die such violent deaths.

In line 16, the speaker again uses a metaphor to illustrate the violence of the war, saying "laughter is bitter to the burned mouth." This reads like an aphorism; the speaker is trying to express how awful it is to speculate on the laughter of a people who were violently wiped out.

In lines 22-24 ("When peaceful [...] old tales."), the speaker describes a scene in which clouds float peacefully above rice fields where farmers may have told their sons old stories. The speaker then describes the bombs falling and smashing "those mirrors." Here, the speaker is comparing two things to mirrors: the paddies reflecting the sky, as well as the fathers telling stories to their sons. This metaphor does subtle work of implying that when the bombers flew over the rice fields, they were looking at a reflection of themselves—in other words, they should have seen their own humanity looking back at them.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "their light hearts turned to stone"
- **Line 16:** "laughter is bitter to the burned mouth"
- **Line 25:** "When bombs smashed those mirrors"

ENJAMBMENT

The lines in this poem move back and forth between being enjambed and being end-stopped. Enjambment generally helps with the pacing of the poem, slowing down or speeding up the amount of information a reader has access to at any given point. It keeps things feeling conversational as well, rather than stiff or overly formal.

The very first line is enjambed, with a line break occurring after "Viet Nam." This is only the first half of a question: "Did the people of Viet Nam"... what, exactly? The reader doesn't know yet, and the lack of conclusion to this question evokes the general uncertainty surrounding "the people of Viet Nam" that will pervade the whole poem. The white space after this phrase subtly suggests the people's absence as well. The question lingers in the air while propelling the reader to continue on.

Enjambment can also draw readers' attention to specific words. Take line 14, which ends on the word "killed" without any punctuation to indicate a pause before moving onto the next line. The reader can't digest the meaning of the line without continuing on to the next in order to receive the rest of the information (that is, what happened "after their children were killed").

Levertov could have chosen to combine lines 14 and 15, so it's worth thinking about the effect of breaking the line after the word "killed." Again, this draws readers' eyes to the striking word "killed." The lack of pause after the word evokes the swiftness with which the Vietnamese people were destroyed.

Enjambment also means that line 15 states simply "there were no more buds." Even though this line is part of the same sentence, because of the enjambment, it occupies its own line. There is a desolation to this unit of information being isolated from what came before or what comes after that reflects the desolation of the Vietnamese people after their children were killed. For them, there *was no* before or after—only the terrible present with its absence and pain.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Viet Nam / use"
- **Lines 3-4:** "ceremonies / to"
- **Lines 6-7:** "ivory, / jade"
- **Lines 11-12:** "gardens / stone"
- **Lines 14-15:** "killed / there"
- **Lines 20-21:** "life / was "
- **Lines 22-23:** "paddies / and"
- **Lines 25-26:** "mirrors / there"
- **Lines 27-28:** "yet / of"
- **Lines 29-30:** "resembled / the"

END-STOPPED LINE

Although the poem moves back and forth between enjambed and end-stopped lines, the majority of the lines are in fact end-stopped. In the first stanza, almost all the lines are end-stopped as the speaker poses a list of questions. The accumulation of end-stopped lines echoes the narrowness of the speaker's questions, the yes or no quality of them. They are not long, expansive questions with many layers, but rather straightforward, precise.

In the second stanza, the use of end-stopped lines contributes to the second speaker's candid and somber tone. Just as "ornament is for joy," so too, it seems, are long, winding sentences across many lines. The moments in the poem that are most based in the present (the present of the poem, a present in which war has wiped out an entire people and their culture) are short, clipped, and end-stopped. For example: lines 10 ("Sir, their light hearts turned to stone."), 16 ("Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth."), and 17-18 ("A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy. / All the bones were charred."). There is a finality to these lines; the fact that they are end-stopped reflects the finality of death, the abrupt ending of a culture.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "stone?"
- **Line 4:** "buds?"
- **Line 5:** "laughter?"
- **Line 7:** "ornament?"
- **Line 8:** "poem?"
- **Line 9:** "singing?"
- **Line 10:** "stone."
- **Line 12:** "ways."
- **Line 13:** "blossom,"
- **Line 15:** "buds."
- **Line 16:** "mouth."
- **Line 17:** "joy."
- **Line 18:** "charred."
- **Line 19:** "Remember,"
- **Line 21:** "bamboo."
- **Line 23:** "terraces,"
- **Line 24:** "tales."
- **Line 26:** "scream."
- **Line 28:** "song."
- **Line 30:** "moonlight."
- **Line 31:** "now."

JUXTAPOSITION

Levertov uses juxtaposition to highlight the stark contrast of human joy and human suffering, of a people before and after the cruelty of war. In this way she's able to illustrate how unnatural and inhumane the impact of war is on the people whose lives it destroys.

In lines 13-15 ("Perhaps they [...] more buds."), the speaker juxtaposes celebration with the deaths of the children and the absence of buds. The reader has to shift quickly from picturing people gathering "to delight in blossom" to a scene devoid of buds, of children.

The same thing happens in lines 17-18 when the speaker abruptly moves from saying "Ornament is for joy." to "All the bones were charred." This juxtaposition is even more swift and dramatic. The reader barely has time to consider the idea that creating beautiful objects is a thing that happy people do before they are picturing burnt and blackened bones. Such a shift is meant to be dramatic, uncomfortable, jarring. It is meant to startle the reader into a feeling of how wrong such violence is.

In lines 22-26 ("When peaceful [...] to scream."), the poem juxtaposes a scene of happy, ordinary life with the bombs that came and destroyed that reality for the people living it. Again, the shift is fast. Lines 22-24 feel leisurely; the bombs appear out of nowhere, which is as it was for the people working the farms. "There was time only to scream" reflects this suddenness; these lives were shattered in an instant. By juxtaposing peace with the brutal effects of war, Levertov makes it clear that one of these things doesn't belong.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom, / but after their children were killed / there were no more buds."
- **Lines 17-18:** "Ornament is for joy. / All the bones were charred."
- **Lines 22-26:** "When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies / and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces, / maybe fathers told their sons old tales. / When bombs smashed those mirrors / there was time only to scream."

IMAGERY

There are several kinds of imagery in this poem. In the first stanza, for example, the imagery is literal (that is, it appeals to the senses but isn't being used in service of metaphor or other figurative devices): "lanterns of stone" are literally just stone lanterns. This imagery is rather vague as the speaker isn't describing something he is seeing but rather trying to characterize a culture according to certain criteria. So rather than the name of a certain kind of flower with its specific shape, color, smell, etc., the speaker just says "the opening of buds." The reader might picture these buds, but every reader will picture something different because of the lack of specificity.

In contrast, the second speaker begins with imagery that is in service of metaphor. When they describe "their light hearts" turning to "stone," they are not describing literal, anatomical hearts or literal stone. They are instead using imagery to evoke an emotional truth: that the once cheerful hearts of the Vietnamese people became heavy, like stone.

The second speaker also uses imagery in a literal way; line 18 ("All the bones were charred.") is describing the actual bones of the people who died in the bombings. This imagery is specific but not detailed. There is a sense of being overwhelmed in the word "All," and the flatness of the statement reflects the shock of seeing something so gruesome. By contrast, when the speaker describes the peaceful scene of clouds "reflected in the paddies / and the water buffalo stepp[ing] surely along terraces," there is an expansiveness to the imagery because this scene is not painful to look at—and is in fact quite filled with pleasure.

Some imagery is more implied than actually described. For instance, when the speaker says "there was time only to scream" (line 26), they are not technically describing a scream, only saying that there was very little time for people to understand what was happening to them. Yet the reader can easily imagine the bombs were followed by screaming, and the following line ("There is an echo yet"), though technically describing "their speech" in line 28, feels like it is also describing the scream. The reader thus might hear the echo of a scream as they are reading, which is perhaps more haunting and visceral than the scream itself.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lanterns of stone"
- **Line 4:** "the opening of buds"
- **Line 5:** "quiet laughter"
- **Lines 6-7:** "bone and ivory, / jade and silver"
- **Line 10:** " light hearts turned to stone"
- **Lines 11-12:** "in gardens / stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways"
- **Line 13:** " they gathered once to delight in blossom"
- **Line 15:** "there were no more buds"
- **Line 16:** "laughter is bitter to the burned mouth"
- **Line 18:** "All the bones were charred"
- **Lines 22-23:** "peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies / and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces"
- **Lines 25-26:** "When bombs smashed those mirrors / there was time only to scream."
- **Lines 27-28:** "There is an echo yet / of their speech which was like a song"
- **Line 30:** "the flight of moths in moonlight"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Levertov ends the poem with a rhetorical question ("Who can say?"), followed by the statement "It is silent now." This is a powerful move, as the aim of the question is in direct contrast to the line of questioning that opened the poem.

While the speaker in the first stanza asked questions that implied yes or no answers, the question "Who can say?" implies that there is no one left who can answer whether the Vietnamese people's "singing resembled / the flight of moths in moonlight." The reader knows the answer to the question—no one can say, because nobody can be sure except the people who died, and they are "silent now." The effect of this question is to make a point, then, rather than to elicit an answer.

The fact that the poem ends with a rhetorical question also casts a shadow on the questions that opened the poem. It seems to point out the uselessness of these questions because any answers given will be speculation, offered by those who cannot possibly know the truth about what "they," the Vietnamese people, were like. It seems to suggest that in fact the speaker of the first stanza is asking the wrong questions—too little, too late.

It is also important to remember here, at the end of the poem, that Levertov was writing in protest of the war while it was *still happening*. By ending with a rhetorical question and silence, she was undoubtedly hoping to spark other questions, questions which might still be answered in time to avoid the future this poem imagines.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** "Who can say?"

VOCABULARY

Reverence (Line 4) - To show deep regard or respect for something.

Inclined (Line 5) - To be disposed to; to have a tendency to do something.

Ornament (Lines 6-7) - Decoration or jewelry.

Epic poem (Line 8) - A long, often book-length, narrative poem which details heroic deeds and legendary or historical events.

Distinguish (Line 9) - To see a difference; to tell apart.

Illumined (Line 12) - Lightened up; brightened.

Paddies (Line 22) - Fields where rice is grown.

Terraces (Line 23) - In this context, flat areas which resemble steps on a hill; used for growing and accessing crops on sloping terrain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"What Were They Like" doesn't follow any sort of fixed poetic form. Instead, it creates its own unique form through the dialogue between the two speakers. The poem consists of 31 lines broken up into two stanzas:

- The first stanza corresponds with the first speaker, who is asking questions about what "the people of Viet Nam" were like before the war.
- The second, much longer stanza corresponds with the second speaker, who is attempting to answer these questions but who is also ultimately trying to gesture toward the fact that these questions can't really *be* answered.

The stanzas both make use of numbers as well—each question in the first stanza has a number, which corresponds to a numbered answer in the second stanza. For example, the first stanza opens with:

> 1) Did the people of Viet Nam
> use lanterns of stone?

The second stanza responds to this with:

> 1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
> It is not remembered whether in gardens
> stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.

The numbers add structure to the poem and help make it clear that the second stanza is a direct reaction to the first. Also notice how the answers in the second stanza are always longer than the corresponding questions in the first—suggesting that the questions themselves are too simple and shallow, and that they cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." The answers are deliberately less clear-cut, less narrow than the questions. With the Vietnamese people themselves gone in the world of the poem, all the second speaker can do now is speculate.

METER

"What Were They Like" is written in free verse, and as such, does not use any kind of consistent meter or rhyme. The line lengths vary considerably, and generally lend themselves to the kind of dialogue which is portrayed in the poem—not exactly casual, but familiar enough to resemble the way people talk in real life.

As a poem that is confronting the horrors of war, and which is earnestly trying to raise awareness about and protest a specific war, it makes sense that it evades the music and order of strictly metered poetry. At the time this was written, U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was highly controversial; a large segment of the population vehemently opposed being involved. Everything about this poem asks to be taken seriously. Where meter might have introduced an element of musical pleasure or a feeling of order, this poem eschews those gestures toward wholeness. It is imagining a bleak future, and part of that bleak vision is evoked through a lack of playfulness.

RHYME SCHEME

"What Were They Like" doesn't adhere to a set rhyme scheme, nor does it utilize rhyme outside a set pattern. The lack of rhyme is a huge part of the poem's directness. If not for the line breaks and stanzas, one could almost believe it is a transcription of an actual conversation between two people.

There is a straight-forward, accessible quality to the poem that is in part due to the lack of rhyme, meter, and other formal constraints, as well as the simplicity of the language itself. This is fitting for the type of poem this is, and in fact for the kind of poetry Levertov was writing at this time in general: poetry that was concerned with activism. The poem has a clear message to it; it is asking its readers to care about the damages of war, and to speak out against it. It was written for a specific moment, in protest of the Vietnam War, and so it needed to be accessible and digestible in order for people to know what to do with it.

SPEAKER

"What Were They Like" is a conversation between two people,

and as such, the poem has two distinct speakers. The speaker of the first stanza is someone who is trying to characterize "the people of Viet Nam" after they have been killed and their culture no longer exists. This speaker, whom the second speaker addresses as "Sir," seems to be someone interested in what the Vietnamese people were like from a historical or anthropological perspective. He asks a series of questions that seem to have the purpose of distinguishing the Vietnamese culture from other cultures.

The speaker of the second stanza feels much more invested in the shared humanity of the Vietnamese people, and is therefore much too moved by the loss of these people to be able to engage with the first man's questions in the way he wants to be engaged. The second speaker has a somewhat more poetic way of speaking about what happened, suggesting that the language of historical inquiry isn't suited to the magnitude of what was lost—that in fact the first speaker may be asking the wrong questions altogether.

This second speaker wants instead to acknowledge the gap left in the world where the Vietnamese people used to be, perhaps implying that not only are there no certain answers for this man's questions, but that violence itself resists logic: how can they ever answer for the crimes committed by their country, for the damages of genocide?

SETTING

The poem takes place in an imagined future. In this future, two people discuss what the Vietnamese people, who were wiped out by the Vietnam War, were like. The poem does not have an explicit physical location, but one might infer, based on when and where Levertov was writing, that it takes place in a post-war United States.

Much of the second stanza evokes a Vietnam that exists inside the speaker's imagination. This speaker admits that there is no way to know for sure what the Vietnamese people were like now that they're gone. So when this speaker describes scenes of gardens and rice fields and water buffalos, they are describing not an actual place but the closest approximation of a place that they are able to create with what information they have: they know only that these people were mostly peasants. They are trying to illustrate that anything they are able to say about the Vietnamese people and their culture at this point will be incomplete and subject to interpretation; there is simply no way for them to know.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Born in Ilford, a town in Essex, England, in 1923, Denise Levertov moved to the United States with her husband, American writer Mitchell Goodman, in 1948. There, she quickly established herself as a well-known and greatly respected American poet.

Though she was from England, Levertov's influences were largely American: this can be seen in her preference for everyday, unadorned, concrete language and straight-forward images. Levertov was also influenced by and later associated with, to some degree, the Black Mountain poets. This was a group of postmodern, progressive poets indebted to the poetics of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. They rejected traditional, "received" forms of poetry in favor of ones that focused on natural rhythms of breathing and emphasized the quotidian aspects of life.

Yet Levertov is also known to have refused labels, and was indeed well-respected for the individuality of her poetic voice. Over the course of her life she wrote increasingly from a place of personal pain and responsibility. Her poetry reflects her political values, and she used her influence to help promote other activist and feminist work. Levertov devoted much of her time to anti-war efforts, joining the War Resisters League and then later helping to found RESIST, a non-profit, anti-war collective.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Conflict between North and South Vietnam had been going on for several decades before the official start of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the U.S.'s involvement, which happened in 1954. However, it wasn't until March, 1965 that President Lyndon B. Johnson sent U.S. troops overseas in support of South Vietnam.

While many Americans supported this at this time, public opinion quickly began to change and opposition to the war grew steadily more heated as it became unclear whether the war could be won and the costs of staying involved. It is during this time that Levertov wrote "What Were They Like," which argues for the inhumanity of the war, especially regarding its impacts on civilian life, as over half the total number of people killed in the war were Vietnamese civilians. At the time of the poem's publication, it was unclear how long the war would last and what its outcome would be. Poets and activists such as Levertov helped change the tide of public opinion, but the war would drag on for another eight years.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- War Resisters League — The website for the War Resisters League, of which Levertov was a member. (https://www.warresisters.org)
- Black Mountain School — An introduction to the Black

Mountain poets, who were a significant influence on Levertov's work. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-black-mountain-school)

- An Overview of the Vietnam War — A fairly in-depth overview of the Vietnam War, including a timeline. (https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history)
- The Poem Out Loud — A reading of the poem from Literature Today UK. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqdP9DBJ1GY)
- Leverton's Biography — Read more about the poet and her work at the Ppoetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/denise-levertov)
- Vietnam War Poetry — A collection of other poems written in response to the Vietnam War. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144186/the-poetry-of-the-vietnam-war)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*What Were They Like?*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Aug 2020. Web. 10 Sep 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*What Were They Like?*." LitCharts LLC, August 12, 2020. Retrieved September 10, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/denise-levertov/what-were-they-like.